

The inheritance of what we hold

Unitarian Universalist Service

Julie A. Lanoie

January 28, 2018

You may have a colander like this in your family. They are easy to come by, and whether they are fancy and expensive from a high end kitchen boutique, OR picked up for a steal at UU thrift, they do the same job. This particular one is 82 years old...It's one of the things I decided to keep when I dismantled the home that belonged to my dutch grandparents. It was purchased in 1936 when my grandmother, who I called Oma, was 22 years old. It was part of a kitchen set that she bought in anticipation of her marriage to my grandfather, which ended up lasting 68 and a half years...and since it's the only one she ever owned, it has strained a lot of potatoes and carrots, which I think everyone in my family would agree, were always boiled much longer than they really needed to be.

My Oma was a lot like other grandmothers you may have known. She crocheted afghans with variegated yarn, volunteered at the hospital, watched The Price is Right and Wheel of Fortune, and the candy dishes on her coffee table were always full, mostly because of her own sweet tooth. She was thrifty, but at the same time, believed in investing in quality. She kept an orderly house and ironed every single piece of laundry. She was of the generation that mended things. She was a shy person, who preferred the company of dogs over small-talking people, but when she did make a friend, it was for life. She was intuitive and trusted her own judgment over anyone else's. Once she made up her mind about something, there wasn't any convincing her otherwise, it wasn't going to change. She was trustworthy, and she could keep a secret FOREVER.

She was not the kind of grandparent who was generous with praise, but we each knew that she loved us deeply. She didn't push us in any particular direction, but she expected that whatever we were doing, we should, "Do our best." She would say, "All we ask is that you do your best." From her, we learned that the only person who really knows if you did your best, is you...We understood that being honest with *ourselves* was the one measure that really mattered.

I'd like to think that if she'd had a better command of English, she would have explained all of this a bit more..because it took me over two decades to really understand that 'Your Best' is not expected to be perfection. She wanted us to care deeply, to pay attention, to be accountable, and to live with intention and purpose. Outcomes were less important than those things, most of the time.

I had the good fortune of spending a lot of time with my grandparents during my childhood, mostly in their 1968 Shasta camping trailer at their campsite on Iona Lake, where I swam out to the dock with Opa while Oma watched from the 1970's aluminum beach chairs that Opa had repaired with replacement webbing from Aubuchon Hardware in Conway. While neighbors at adjacent campsites cooked hot dogs on the grill, we ate boiled dinners in the heat of summer. At night, we played Yahtzee and I learned my first Dutch words. Mostly numbers, and a few of the Dutch and Yiddish swearwords that I now use for all my computer passwords.

It was at that little table in the camper that I learned that HATE was a very bad word. It was one of the few things I ever said that made Oma really angry. In response to something I had said about a girl in my class, she lectured firmly in her blend of Dutch and English, "Yoolie...you do NOT hate anyone. Maybe you don't like her, maybe you don't like her VERY MUCH, but you do NOT hate anybody. You understand?" It was the same with food. Maybe you don't like broccoli or spinach, but you never say HATE and you eat it anyway, because some people have nothing.

It was in the presence of my grandparents that I also learned to check the door more than once to make sure it was locked, not only when we left the house, but when we were inside. Oma locked the doors, windows, and the car even when it was parked in plain site on a dirt road with nobody around. I remember standing outside the camper, on our way back from the beach, desperately needing to use the bathroom..waiting for the screen door and the interior doors to be unlocked, wondering, "Who are we trying to keep out? There is nobody else here." But Oma was always alert to possibility. Sensitivity was part of her biologic make up, but she had also grown up with an alcoholic father, where unpredictability in the household had cultivated vigilance as a way of being in the world.

She was always one step ahead of us. She ate her food before it had cooled. She kept enough cash hidden in the house in case of unanticipated travel. She wanted everyone home before dark, and if you were running late and hadn't called, you might find her sitting in her chair with the skin of her knuckles red and raw where she had nervously chewed them while she was waiting for you to walk through the door, because although she never admitted it out loud, a part of her really thought you were never coming back.

As a young child, I noticed her stiffen when people would assume that her accent was German, (an easy mistake for a perfectly friendly stranger). Her grip on my hand would tighten, her jaw would set, and she would correct them. "No. NOT German. We are Dutch." In time, I grew to understand that the past informed many of Oma's actions in the present, but it was my grandfather, Opa, who was truly trapped there.

He was six months younger, born in the same year, in the Jewish neighborhood adjacent to the block where Oma and her more middle class Lutheran family lived along the canal. They grew up together, camping, hiking, singing in choral groups, and biking around Europe with large groups of friends as members of the Socialist Youth Movement. After a long engagement, they married in 1941, without the approval of her parents, who, although they liked my grandfather, worried about the risks of her marrying into a Jewish family during the Occupation.

The early years of their marriage were exceptionally difficult. There were increasing restrictions, food rations, frigid temperatures without electricity, coal, or cooking oil. Misguided V-2 missiles hit nearby buildings shattering windows in their home. In 1942, Opa was arrested and taken to SS headquarters for questioning, but was released because his interfaith marriage and the fact that he had a child *initially* provided exemption from deportation. After this incident, they decided that they couldn't risk another raid and created a secret hiding place in their home. He immediately retreated from the outside world, becoming completely dependent on my grandmother for his survival. By 1943, his parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, and cousins, had been rounded up, one by one, and sent to Bergen Belsen, Sobibor, Auschwitz, and other destinations from which only three out of sixty-eight extended family members ever returned.

The youth group of my grandparents' teen years became natural networks for the resistance during the war. By 1943, Oma had a toddler who was learning her first words, she was pregnant with her second child during what is famously known as the Hunger Winter, was making twenty mile treks by bike to the countryside to trade for turnips and carrots to feed her family (which she boiled and strained through this colander...) and she had become an active participant in the Dutch Underground. She didn't seek out this involvement...it evolved, first as an errand to help a close friend, then to keep her husband safe, and ultimately, beyond the circle of friends and family. Each of her actions involved significant risk and the hyper-vigilance of her childhood became a critical survival tool; Indeed a great strength. She smuggled false identity documents in my aunt's diapers, delivered illegal food rations to people in hiding, and accompanied people to safe houses when their hiding places had been compromised. My grandparent's home in The Hague was used as temporary shelter for downed pilots, people in transit between hiding places, and others protected by the resistance. So in this way, Oma directly supported the successful safeguarding of over forty Jewish people, Opa was just one of them.

After liberation, they remained in survival mode..raising young children in a country

recovering from war, discovering with certainty that Opa's family had perished, and continuing to fear the potential destabilization of Europe in the future. They emigrated to the United States in 1957, where they lived the second half of their lives as proud US citizens. Opa's skills in high precision optics were in high demand, facilitated their entry into the US, and provided a stable income. Oma spent the majority of her time at home, where she was isolated socially, and relied on television as her primary English tutor. Their children were 14, 12, and 8 when they left Holland for New York and they assimilated as children do, forging new identities as Americans. They were raised without any religious affiliation, by parents who had never really been people of faith. My grandparents worked hard, saved money, and never bought anything on credit. They read newspapers and watched the evening news. They always made time to vote. They continued to enjoy camping and singing, they celebrated the weddings of their children and the arrival of the next generation..and eventually, they retired to Florida like many of their New England neighbors.

Oma never wanted to talk about the war years, it was in the past and it was not open for discussion. She simply dismissed it. In contrast, **Opa was compelled to talk.** He would invite us to go for walks to the pier on Nokomis beach on Casey Key and describe the details about his hiding place. How wallpaper hanging skills of his neighbor were used to create a secret door. How he designed and built a cookstove that used minimal fuel. He often focused on numbers, calculating and recalculating the percentage of different branches of the family who were killed. But most of all, he told us about the risks Oma had taken to keep him safe. It was imperative that we understood what she had done. **But like many people who experience trauma, his telling was void of emotion, frozen, full of facts, without any feelings.** As a child, I remember thinking that listening to Opa talk about this was like watching a person who was trapped inside a TV...we could tell when it switched on, we could see him, but he couldn't see or respond to us, we couldn't change the channel, and we couldn't interrupt the pre-recorded program, which was always the same, "She saved me, I owe her my life, and so do you."

This was undeniably true, but it made for a difficult dynamic in their marriage. His constant retelling made her uncomfortable, not only because she did *not* want to be glorified, but because acknowledging their history was admitting vulnerability. Although they had gone through this horror together, their experiences and responses to it were very different. In many ways, Opa had been protected from the outside world during the war, while she had not. There was much she had seen and never shared with anyone. His losses were measurable, hers were less visible...and ironically, in their lives after the holocaust, she held a deeper seated fear of anti-semitism than he ever had; he knew it's power, but SHE knew it's subtlety, and she never really felt safe anywhere. He wanted us 'Never to Forget', so it wouldn't happen again...she understood that it was happening all the time. While he had compartmentalized his emotions and buried them deeply, hers were more integrated with her experience...just under the surface, where she worked hard to keep them. As much as he needed to remember his story of being saved, she needed not be reminded about it, and their tight grasp on their separate ways of coping with this trauma sadly kept them from healing the pain of the past together and fully living in the present.

For Opa, dementia offered an unanticipated opportunity for growth. In his 96th year, he had a recurring nightmare. He was living with me at the time, I would hear him crying out, and when I went to him, he would describe it to me, "Oh Yoolie..." "I am glad to be awake. I had a terrible dream. My sisters..my parents...all taken from home...by soldiers...on trains.....all killed." Then he would hover juxtaposed between dismissing it all as a dream, until the horror of remembering would spread over him. "Oh no...no

no no...it is VAR! (It is true). It wasn't a dream...it was a memory. He would seek validation, calling out their names in questioning.." Sophia, Lizbeth..my mother, my father.....all of them...Yopie?" (his little brother, who had shared a room with him all of his life?) "All dead? All killed?" "Yes Opa, that was real. It was terrible." And in that moment, his story expanded from "one who had been saved...to one who had lost", and he wept tears that had been withheld for 75 years, dementia allowing them to pass by former defenses that were no longer secure. He finally allowed himself to miss them, and it hurt. The next night...or if we were lucky...with a few days of rest in between, it would all happen again, as if for the first time. And though this was extremely painful for him, and gut wrenching to witness, it was part of his story that he had never allowed himself to fully experience emotionally. He needed to let it flow through him, to grieve and mourn, and feel it in order to live the whole truth of his life...in order to die in peace...which he did, as the last living member of his generation, at the age of 98.

Oma experienced her own healing too...in 2007 she was recognized by Yad Vashem as Righteous Among the Nations. She was 92 at the time, and traveling to the ceremony, which was held at the Holocaust Museum in Miami, took considerable physical and emotional effort. On our long journey home while we were in a rest stop on route 75North, she suddenly reflected with wonderment on her feelings during the service...She said,"It was so strange..when the cantor started to sing..I felt for the first time that I *belonged* somewhere..." This woman, who had lived across the ocean from her homeland for more than half of her life, whose parents didn't approve of her marriage, and who had kept secrets to protect her family from danger said she had not heard music like that since she sat at the kitchen table with Opa's family, with whom she had been very close. She started to cry, which wasn't something she did easily. She said, "I had the feeling that I was home for the first time in my whole life...it makes no sense, but I felt like these were MY people." The safety of this homecoming allowed her to reclaim lost pieces of herself, to accept the gratitude expressed by people who were alive because of her choices, and to release the grief she had been carrying for more than six decades.

During the final months of her life, I slept on a couch in the extra room of their Florida condo, connected by a monitor so she could call me when she needed help changing position. She frequently had vivid dreams during this time, and one night, I awoke to the sound of her screaming. Her eyes darted around the room. She was seeing bodies all around her, she was hearing gunshots, and she was yelling, "There are people on the street, they are hungry, they have no money, they have no food, they have nowhere to go..I can't do anything..I can't do anything..please help me, help me, help me.." When she returned from the dream to the present, she collapsed into my arms, the reverse of what I used to do as a small child. she talked about how people were suffering all around her all the time, how helpless she had felt...she cried and kept repeating, "I should have done more..I should have done more..." After she was settled back into bed, I whispered into her ear... "Oma...you did your best..." and while we both knew this was true, it was little comfort, because 'Our Best' in unimaginable situations like these feels utterly inadequate.

The legacy of second generation holocaust survivors is one of gratitude and guilt..haunted by unanswerable questions: What if others had lived instead of our family? Who would they be? What might they have contributed to the world? I think of all of Opa's family and the generations that never had the opportunity to exist at all, and yet, here am I.

Sometimes we bond to the trauma of the stories we hold and they take on a life of their own. For me, in middle childhood, this involved imagining suitable hiding places, for dolls..pets..people..and the emergence of a lifelong discomfort if the nearest exit is indeed, behind me. As a teenager, serious existential angst about faith blossomed...I told myself,"You'd better get it right...because religion can be life or death." In young adulthood, when exploring serious relationships, it manifested as an internal dialogue something like this (Is my potential commitment strong enough that I could hide this person in a secret compartment for an indefinite period of time while risking my own life?...Or the opposite question: Can I imagine this person doing that for me?), and as I approached the chronological age when significant events had occurred for my grandparents, I was filled with self-doubt and comparisons to their experiences."When Oma was 27, she was rescuing people from deportation lines...I'm 27...I adopted a dog from the Humane Society...big deal...."

I had inherited Opa's theme: Is my life worth the risks that were taken to save it?

And...would I have made the same choices she made if I were in the same situation? Would I have taken action, or would I have been immobilized by fear and indecision? Would I even have been paying enough attention to the world around me to know when it was time to act?

This uncertainty defined my identity for a long time. Continuing to ask the same question was keeping me from my own truth, from being fully present in my own life.

In one of our last very serious conversations, I admitted this to Oma,"I don't know if I could have done what you did. All the risks you took..I don't know if I would have made the same decisions. I'd really like to think I would have...but the more honest I am with myself, the more I have serious doubts..."She looked at me with an expression that said, "Gosh, I hope you haven't spent 25 years worrying about THAT..." and then, softening, she said, "Yoolie...I didn't think about it the way you are thinking about it looking backwards. You can never really know what you would have done because you were not there. Because you have your OWN life...it's a different time. You have your OWN choices to make...You can only go forward."

And so I did...And while it's human nature to wonder how we each might have responded had we been in her shoes, she challenges us to redirect our energy, to the moment we are living in, right now.

By releasing the comparison and self doubt I had carried linked to my grandmother's legacy, I could finally see that what I had been doing all along, in spite of myself, was in fact, my best. It's what I have the great honor of doing in my daily work now...creating safe space for the sharing of vulnerable stories, which heal through their telling, but are not mine to hold.

I think of my grandparents when I use this colander...when I wash

vegetables...when I choose to hold on to some things and let others flow through.
Because that's what you have to do to move forward, *never to forget*, but to continue
on, to the next step...